DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 073 724 FL 003 968

AUTHOR	Rickett, Adele Austin
TITLE	A "Translation" Exercise in Chinese Poetry.
PUB DATE	25 Nov 72
NOTE	16p.; Paper presented at the meeting of the Chinese Language Teachers Association, Atlanta, Georgia, November 25, 1972
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Chinese; *College Students; *Literature Appreciation; *Poetry; Sino Tibetan Languages; *Teaching Methods; Teaching Techniques

AESTRACT

A teaching technique for helping college students of Chinese poetry comprehend the complexity and error often caused by translation is discussed. The author illustrates how she provides the equivalent English word for each of the Chinese characters in a poem from the "Shih-ching," and requires students to prepare their own translation of the poem. Student analyses of the meaning of the poem are then discussed. It is suggested that this process, which directly involves the student in interpreting the poem, offers a greater opportunity for developing poetic insight than does the reading of commercially-prepared translations. (RL)

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

A "TRANSLATION" EXERCISE IN CHINESE POETRY

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Adele Austin Rickett

University of Pennsylvania

ED 073724

The survey course of Chinese literature in translation for the Western student has been made immensely easier to teach since the publication from the early 1960's on of an increasing number of translations and general studies. Helpful as these may be in providing a wide range of material covering the major periods of Chinese literature, the fact still remains, however, that the student can only see the poetry as the translator portrays it. The moment one English word or phrase is chosen, the other possibilities are inevitably barred from the reader's experience.

In an effort to cut through the veil of translation and involve the student directly in the reading of a Chinese poem, I developed several years ago a series of "translation exercises" for classroom use. The procedure is very simple. For a given poem I write out the characters line by line and provide an English equivalent below each character. Granted, my selected of English words is open to the same criticism I have just raised with regard to volumes of translations, but obviously some transfer from Chinese to English must be made, and by sticking to basic word equivalents I hope to leave room for various interpretations on the part of the students. For ~~this~~ some of the poems I do not provide ~~no~~ notes ~~concerning~~ to elucidate the images used. This could be considered a drawback, I suppose, but I have found that the images become much more significant when their meaning is explained in the class in relation to erroneous assumptions

FL003964

coming out of Western patterns of thought.

The students take the poem home and write a paraphrase, analysis, or appreciation which they then bring to class the following week. Each student reads his or her rendition aloud for criticism and comparison, and as the hour progresses, the meaning of the poem begins to emerge. At the end I distribute existing translations of the poem by way of comparison and discuss these translations in the light of our own findings.

The students who take the course are mostly from other departments in the University, and they represent a wide range of interests -- biology, physical therapy, nursing, finance, marketing, economics, fine arts, architecture, English, etc. Generally speaking those who have been exposed to the Chinese language because of family background or who are currently studying the language in school, tend to produce much more literal translations. The others feel no such restrictions and let their minds wander freely as the words speak to them. Sometimes these flights of imagination catch the original flavor of the poem with startling insight; other times the student must be brought back to earth through the combined criticism in class of teacher and fellow students. In any case by the end of the exercise they have all learned a great deal more about the poem than could have been possible if they had simply read one or another translation.

Since the Shih ching is the first body of poetry with which we deal in the course, Poem #23, "Yeh yu ssu chün 野有死麕 is the first to be assigned as an exercise. It is given to the students as follows:

野 有 死 麕
Wilds there is dead doe

白 茅 包 之
White grass bind it.

有 女 懷 春
There is girl cherishing spring (feelings)

吉 士 誘 之
Fine gentleman entice her.

林 有 樸 樕
Forest there are shrubby trees

野 有 死 鹿
Wilds there is dead deer.

白 茅 純 束
White grass wrap bind.

有 女 如 玉
There is girl like jade.

舒 而 脫 脫 兮
Slowly! Gently!

無 感 我 帨 兮
Do not move my handkerchief

無 使 尨 也 吠
Do not cause dog bark.

I selected this poem because I was struck by the wide divergence of interpretation displayed by the various translations in print. Karlgren, of course, translates the lines very literally and adds a comment: "A girl secretly enticed into a love affair is likened to precious game carefully wrapped up and hidden by the lucky poacher."[1] Waley has a much more poetic rendition, and also has a comment on the significance of the poem: "If people find a dead deer in the woods, they

cover it piously with rushes. But there are men who 'kill' a girl, in the sense that they seduce her and then fail to 'cover up' the damage by marrying her. Such is the burden of this poem, its last three lines calling up 'elliptically' the scene of the seduction."[2] Couvreur, faithful to the interpretation of Chu Hsi, adds the note: "Une jeune personne réclame le respect dû à sa vertu."[3] Legge provides an interpretation based on Han dynasty commentators: "A virtuous young lady resists the attempts of a seducer. The little Preface says that the piece teaches disgust at the want of proper ceremonies, and belongs to the close of Chow's reign, when the influence of king Wan was gradually prevailing to overcome the lust and license, through which the Shang dynasty was extinguished. A lady is sought to be won by insufficient ceremonies, yet they were better than none, and showed that the times were wording; and she is willing." Legge goes on to complain: "He must be clear-sighted who can see traces of all this in the ode. . . ."[4] Granet enlarges on this interpretation with some theories about mating customs that need not concern us here.[5] Ezra Pound sees the poem as a clear case of virginity lost and seems to relish the sexual implications with unfeigned delight.[6] Robert Payne looks on the poem as a direct representation of sexual union by translating the character yu 誘 in line four as "lay over her."[7] Archibald MacLeish seems to have been influenced by Payne's rendition because he too translates the line "Fine knight over her." He then goes on to interpret the poem:

> There is a dead doe, slender body, on the forest floor covered with white rushes. There is a yearning lady covered by a fine knight. They are the same? The one mistaken for the other? No. The poem repeats itself. In the oakenshaw, in the waste land, there is a dead

doe. White rushes are over her. There is a lady beautiful as jade. So there are two images, like but unlike. How unlike? As unlike as the stillness of the dead doe under her rushes and the laughing girl with her absurd remonstrance: "Don't! My dog will bark!" . . . (somebody might see us!). A No turned Yes in the words that say it.

Discussion of this poem can move in circles unless one realizes that this is not -- or not merely -- a narrative. These two like and unlike images lie side by side in time as well as place. Indeed, that is the whole point and meaning -- that they lie side by side: the girl beautiful as jade at the moment of most intense life which balances so precariously on the edge of the ridiculous with its "Don't! Don't!"; and there beside it in the same scene, the same time, that other body slender as hers, soft as hers, but dead, not alive, and covered not with love but with white grasses. But what then is the emotion of the poem? Grief for the dead doe? Amusement at the giggling girl? Neither the one nor the other. The emotion is in the place between -- the place where they are together -- where they meet, as indeed they do meet in our lives though we have no words to say it: death and passion, the human comedy and indifferent death.[8]

There may be other translations of which I am unaware, but these seven should suffice to indicate the range of interpretation indulged in by the "pros" in the field of Chinese studies. Let us turn now to what the students have done with the poem. Certain points recur in their "translations" from year to year, one of the most persistent being the contrast between life and death as symbolized by the death of the deer and the life of the maiden brimming with thoughts of love in spring.

Some are reinforced in this idea because they see the color of the grass, "white," as an indication of winter. Either the grass is white because it is dried out from the cold, or it is white because it is covered with snow. Thus one student explained:

> I saw the idea of seasons changing - the deer representing the dead image of winter - the white grass - snow. The girl desires spring warmth - life. The man desires her - warmth. The girl - nature, seasons - is unchanging like jade. The second stanza saying that the man shouldn't try to disturb things, the time isn't right and the seasons can't change.

Another wrote:

> In the wilds of nature the doe has died
> Shrouded only in unfertile grass.
> Yet, seasons change and the lass longs for warmth,
> His love will soon encloak her
> For she is green and supple and ripe.
>
> Yet now again the doe is dead
> Unfertile youth the seasons do change
> The now ripened again ready;
> But wait! Go slowly!
> The cycle of nature's own ways have been set
> And one can never disturb Her plan.

When the question of the grass comes out in such renditions, I explain that botanically pai mao 白茅 "white grass" is a particular

type of long, thin-leaved grass that is whitish in color, and, being strong, is useful for binding things. Thus it is highly unlikely that it symbolizes winter or death. Actually, however, even when a student has assessed the quality of the grass correctly, the death-life image may still dominate. Added to this is the sense of peace and quiet that some students feel in the poem, and the natural order of the seasons. One student analyzed the poem in the following fashion:

> First verse. The first line conjures up the image of something soft, beautiful, timid but inquisitive; the doe. It is in the "wilds" a place which connotes freedom and lack of inhibiting forces. However, the doe is not living. In the second line, "white grass" is encompassing the dead wild thing. It is a very peaceful type of death image. White grass could be the long, thin wild grass often growing in forests. When it is young, one side of it appears silvery, or white. From a distance it would look as if something were lying on a cloud.
>
> A girl is likened to the doe. By associating her to the doe, she too acquires its softness, etc. By longing for spring, perhaps she is still idealistic and naive, hoping for new and aesthetic beauty in life; Trusting. But other, sophisticated, forces, the "gentleman," tempt her to look in a different direction.
>
> Second verse. . . . The image of a gentle, but lifeless creature is also repeated. The girl is made to fit this environment in another manner. She is rough, uncut, beautiful, but in a sense, inert. She must be discovered and polished to be even more beautiful. But doing this will kill the naturalness about her.
>
> Third verse. The third verse shifts to concentrate on the

sophisticating, stifling forces of mankind, of society. It is imploring that, in order to acquire what is wanted from the wilds, it must be done carefully. "Slowly! Gently!" The camouflage or covering, the "handkerchief" must not be slipped out of place to reveal true intent and give warning; "cause dog bark."

Just as white grass causes problems in relation to the grass, the color of jade is seen almost always in association with jade jewelry, thus "green." It adds a whole new dimension to the students' understanding when it is pointed out that the jade referred to here is white and that it is a symbol of purity.

The question of who the young people are in the poem is variously answered. Some see the relationship as one in which the girl is actively seeking love and is quite ready and willing to be wooed by the young man. Others see her in a passive role, accepting the advances of the lover as inevitable. A combination of these two views is presented in a very Western-oriented rendition:

A young couple wanders in the forest;
They stop to make love;
Her purity is violated -
She seeks true love;
He desires only physical pleasure.

The young girl lies still and silent;
Realizing what has just happened;
Praying that it is not so,
Not wanting him to leave her.

More severe in interpretation are those who see this as a rape scene. For these students the young man is a hunter who comes upon the young girl walking in the woods. He finds her irresistible, grabs her, and rapes her. Thus one student entitled the poem, "The Hunt or Action in the Forest." There was a gasp of unbelief from the class when he came to the line in the last stanza: "The silence is broken by a shrill of terror."

Such interpretations give rise to the question of location. Is all the action taking place in the forest? Are the dead deer and the live girl in close proximity? Or do we have two scenes: the forest with the dead deer and the home of the girl? Some students question whether the girl would be walking alone in the woods and so feel that perhaps her house is close by. Some, who are repelled by the idea that the seduction could take place with the dead deer so close by, would shift that part of the poem to the girl's courtyard or room. The dog, then, is the family watchdog. When the dog is mentioned there is usually disagreement concerning its ownership. For those who feel that the man is a hunter, the dog must obviously be his hound. Those who see the man as a young lover and nothing more feel that the dog probably belongs to the girl and if they see her as walking in the woods, the dog is accompanying her for protection. The Western background of the students shows very clearly in most of the discussions on these points.

Without throwing cold water on those students who place the entire poem in the woods, I point out parallels in other poems in which a courtship takes place in the vicinity of the girl's home and in which she voices her concern that people will find out about it. Granet includes in ~~the~~ Appendix III to his Festivals and Songs of Ancient China (p. 278) one of

a series of Hakka folk songs which bears a theme similar to our poem:

Three times barked the watch-dog at the gate.
Surely now my lover must be coming.
Hush, my dog, and let me open the door
With my hand behind I'll lead him in.

And there is also Shih ching No. 76, "Ch'iang Chung-tzu" in which the young girl pleads with her lover not to make any noise for fear of arousing her family.

Most of the students attempt a poetic rendering of the poem, some in rhyme, others not. Many accompany their renderings with an explanation of their feeling about its meaning. One of the more unusual renderings was an attempt at a haiku:

Tied doe lies on ice,
While girl of jade shines softly.
Have care! Do not move!

In summing up the ideas generated in class about the poem, I try to point out that our Western training often causes us to look for metaphysical significance in what may be very simple images, and that the students are perhaps trying to read into the poem more than was originally intended. I point out that this is in essence a folk song and call on the remarks of a person who audited the course one fall. A Westerner born and brought up in China, she said very simply, "The content of this poem can be summed up in two words: food and sex, the two most basic drives of mankind. Food keeps one alive in this generation, and sex assures the continuance of the family in succeeding generations." It

would seem most logical, therefore, to view the poem as a positive expression of the vitality of human life, warm and vibrant.

I think that most students come away from the exercise in agreement with this picture of the poem, although the more morbidly-minded and those who must analyze all literature in complex, psychological terms may cling to their own interpretations. That is their privilege. In any case, when the existing translations by the "pros" are distributed, they are always delighted to find that the wide range of interpretation represented by their own efforts is not at all strange.

The second poem is given to illustrate Lü shih 律詩, or regulated verse. I have tried several different poems from the T'ang dynasty, including some by Li Po, Tu Fu, and Wang Wei. But by far the most satisfactory from the point of view of an exercise has been Lo Pin-wang's "Tsai yü yung ch'an" 在獄詠蟬 [In Prison the Singing Cicada], which I give as follows:

西 陸 蟬 聲 唱
Western Continent cicada sound sings

南 冠 客 思 深
Southern Cap guest thoughts deep.
不 堪 玄 鬢 影
Not endure dark-tressed shadow.[11]

來 對 白 頭 吟
Come confront white head song.[12]

露 重 飛 難 進
Dew heavy fly difficult advance

風 多 響 易 沉
Wind great, sound easily drowned.

無 人 信 高 潔
No man believes high purity

誰 為 表 予 心
Who act reveal my heart?

In this case I provide a few explanatory notes since phrases like "Western Continent" and"Southern cap guest" are completely incomprehensible to the students. With these aids the students have little difficulty in relating the season of the year and the cicada's approaching death with the prisoner's plight. Furthermore the purity of the cicada is equated with the purity of the prisoner and the poem for many becomes simultaneously a description of the insect and the human being. But within that generally agreed upon framework, the "translations" display a great deal of variety, some of the interpretations perhaps influenced by my choice of English words for the Chinese characters, and the fact that a subject is not expressed in some lines. For example, the lines "Not endure dark-templed shadow/Come confront white head song" is seen variously as 1) "I cannot endure to see the black feathered shadow/Singing to me, white-haired (with sorrow)", 2) "He no longer bothers to look around/But only listens as his wife laments"; 3) "The cicada unable to endure his dark eyes/ Soon to see no longer/Comes to face the whitehaired captive's lament"; and 4) "I cannot live with the shadow of disgrace on my head/I must confront them, reminding them of my unrewarded loyalty."

At this point the discussion each year usually becomes heated as each student tries to defend his or her understanding of the lines. However, there is invariably one student who will point out that the "dark-templed shadow" may refer to the cicada, on the one hand, but may at the same time refer to the prisoner who is still in the prime of his life, i.e., "dark-haired." What is unendurable is that he, being still young, has been cast aside by his ruler and placed in prison where he cannot fulfill his proper role in life. His plight is likened to the

cicada whose song becomes shrill and insistent as autumn approaches, i.e., the end of his life; but at the same time his plight is likened to the wife of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju who must sing the "white-head's lament." How unfair that the "dark-haired one" should be placed in the position of the "white head." When this explanation emerges, most students will nod in agreement and feel quite satisfied. Their sense of mutual admiration in the cooperative effort of bringing meaning to the poem is augmented when they read the one existing translation I know about, the one in Witter Bynner's Jade Mountain.[13] "How could he be so far off," said one student, "as to think the cicada was trying to give him courage?" She was referring to the first two lines, "While the year sinks westward, I hear a cicada/Bid me to be resolute here in my cell."

I do not want to convey the impression that out of this experience the students think they have become masters of translation. This is far from the case. They all have a healthy reppect for the difficulties involved, but through this exercise they have learned something about the techniques of Chinese prosody -- the use of parallelism in Lü shih, the rhyme scheme, tonal pattern, and the grammatical structure. But most of all I think they come to realize how much emotion and depth of feeling can be conveyed in a very few words.

The final exercise is in the tz'u 詞 form of poetry. Here I provide two yung-wu 詠物 (singing about things) poems on willow fluff in the "Shui-lung yin" 水龍吟 pattern. The first is by Chang Chieh (d. A.D. 1102) and the second, which matches it, is by Su Shih. I ask the students to look at both poems, choose one to work on, but at the same time try to decide which poem was written first and which second. In

class as they read their poems they explain why they chose the poem they did and why they think it came first or second. As in the Shih ching poem I provide no notes for the poems. The students are on their own.

There is no time here to go into a detailed discussion of this exercise, but the effect on the students is similar to that of the preceding two. I give no grade for the exercises, and I do not insist that they follow my line of thinking. But by having to think creatively about the poems as raw material and not through the medium of another person's translation, they all, in greater or lesser degree, depending upon their own aesthetic awareness, come to a deeper understanding of Chinese poetry.

Notes

1. Bernhard Karlgren, The Book of Odes (Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1950), pp. 12-14.

2. Arthur Waley, The Book of Songs (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1937), p. 60.

3. S. Couvreur, Cheu king (Sien Hsien: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1934), pp. 26-27.

4. James Legge, The Chinese Classics (London: Henry Frowde, 1871), IV, pt. 1, 34.

5. Marcel Granet, Festivals and Songs of Ancient China (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1932), pp. 118-119.

6. Ezra Pound, The Confucian Odes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 10.

7. Robert Payne, The White Pony (New York: Mentor Books repr., 1960), p. 33.

8. Archibald MacLeish, Poetry and Experience (Cambridge Riverside Press, 1961), p. 60.

9. Designation of the 18th of the 28 constellations or stellar mansions comprising the Chinese zodiac. It consists of the seven stars in our Pleiades and, as the westernmost of the 28 Chinese zodiacal constellations, is particularly associated with autumn.

10. An expression which signifies a prisoner. The term derives from a passage in the Tso chuan where, under the year 580 (Legge, Chinese Classics, V, 371), we are told: "The Marquis of Chin was surveying the arsenal, when he observed Chung-yi and asked about him saying: 'Who is that tied up there and wearing a southern cap?' The officer in charge

replied: 'It is the prisoner from Ch'u whom the people of Cheng delivered to us.'"

11. The word pin (templed) literally means "hair on the temples," but can also refer here to the dark head of the cicada, or perhaps to the glossy green-black color of its body.

12. There is a poem of this name written by the wife of Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju which she recited to him when she found him turning to other women. In it she tells him that all is now over between them and then ends with the words: "So must a girl/Cry when she's married,/ If she find not a man/ Of single heart,/ Who will not leave her/ Till her hair is white." Tr. from Arthur Waley, Translations from the Chinese (New York: Knopf, 1941), pp. 50-51.

13. P. 102 (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1945).